



# FORMING THE GRAND STRATEGIST ACCORDING TO SHAKESPEARE

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Shakespeare, like Clausewitz and Sun Tzu, locates the crux of strategic genius in the analysis of character, both of individuals and of societies. A key ingredient in strategic education, therefore, should be the close study of human character — not least through classic fiction. In *Coriolanus*, Shakespeare explores the relationship between tactics and strategy, the place of realism in strategic discourse, and the relationship between a strategist and his *polis*. His ideas anticipate modern debates in international relations theory, especially ones about the "first image" and *realpolitik*. He insists that strategic calculation cannot omit the analysis of leaders and the regimes that form them.

*The personalities of statesmen and soldiers are such important factors that in war above all it is vital not to underrate them.*

– Clausewitz<sup>1</sup>

*The great authors not only reveal themselves aware of statecraft, some are themselves strategists, exploring ideas fundamental to statecraft and international order.*

– Charles Hill<sup>2</sup>

From 1922 to 1924, the U.S. Army assigned Maj. Dwight D. Eisenhower to the Panama Canal Zone. There, under Gen. Fox Conner, he would receive the kernel of an extraordinary strategic education, one that would see him through his position as supreme commander in World War II and two presidential terms. Conner sought to prepare Eisenhower for another European war, one the general saw as inevitable. He believed this war would draw in the United States, and victory, he realized, would turn less on military might than on how well Americans could manage their al-

liances. Thus, when Eisenhower arrived in the Canal Zone, Conner introduced him not only to Clausewitz and Jomini, but to everything from Freud to Nietzsche — any author who could teach him to understand the human psyche.<sup>3</sup> Among these unusual tutors was William Shakespeare. In *At Ease: Stories I Tell to Friends*, Eisenhower recounts how Conner used the Bard to instruct his eager subordinate:

He often quoted Shakespeare at length and he could relate his works to wars under discussion. 'Now when Shakespeare wrote his plays,' General Conner might say, 'he frequently portrayed soldiers, and not entirely fictional ones—historical figures such as Prince Hal and Richard. In describing these soldiers, their actions, and giving them speech, Shakespeare undoubtedly was describing soldiers he *knew* at first hand, identifying them, making them part of his own characters. Even when he was writing of Julius Caesar, the dramatist must have endowed him with an education, characteristics, mannerisms that Shakespeare knew in some of the leaders of his own time.'<sup>4</sup>

1 Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), I.2.

2 Charles Hill, *Grand Strategies: Literature, Statecraft, and World Order* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 7.

3 Conner first met Eisenhower at Fort Meade, where he interviewed Eisenhower and a young George S. Patton Jr. about their ideas for employing tanks in modern warfare. Jean Edward Smith, *Eisenhower in War and Peace* (New York: Random House, 2012), 62–65.

4 Dwight D. Eisenhower, *At Ease: Stories I Tell to Friends* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), 187. Others have observed the accuracy of Shakespeare's technical knowledge of complex professions like seamanship: "The first scene of *The Tempest* is a very striking instance of the great accuracy of Shakespeare's knowledge in a professional science, the most difficult to attain without the help of experience. He must have acquired it by conversation with some of the most skillful seamen of that time" (Lord Mulgrave). Our thanks to Timothy Burns for pointing out this example. William Shakespeare, *The Tempest: With Introduction Notes and Glossary*, ed. David M. Bain (Marston, UK: Samson Low, 1892), 102 (see footnote 62).



Policymakers, military officers, and scholars have praised Conner's principles of strategy.<sup>5</sup> However, too few of them have commented on the diverse education with which he provided Eisenhower and its implications for engaging in strategy and policy. Conner sought to give Eisenhower more than a merely tactical, operational, or engineering education.<sup>6</sup> He wanted to prepare him to work at the highest levels of strategy and policy, and for that he would need psychology, philosophy, and literature. In Shakespeare, Conner found an instructor who brought together all three.

In this paper, we treat Shakespeare as a serious strategic thinker, or at least, as someone who thought deeply and carefully about strategy. As the study of grand strategy gains traction among policymakers and the public, we want to encourage a new generation of students — much as Conner encouraged Eisenhower — to look for strategic wisdom not just among military minds and scholars of international relations and security studies, but among the philosophers and playwrights who have thought most profoundly about human character, even if they were not themselves military strategists.

*Coriolanus* chronicles the rise and fall of the Roman captain Caius Martius Coriolanus. The tragedy offers some of Shakespeare's most mature political thought — and some of his most timely. The play grapples with the tensions between elite and popular rule, the use of foreign threats for domestic gain, the operation and evolution of the ancient world's most effective political constitution, and the familial norms that undergirded the early Roman republic. In our age of populist revolts and unsettled norms, *Coriolanus* might be the most politically relevant of all Shakespeare's plays.<sup>7</sup>

Shakespeare seems to trace some of Coriolanus' strategic flaws to his upbringing and education. He suggests that from a young age Caius Martius imbibed the martial spirit of Rome. This education makes him formidable to Rome's enemies, but it also leaves him "churlish, uncivil, and altogether unfit for any man's conversation."<sup>8</sup> Shakespeare highlights this temper in the play, describing Coriolanus as a man who cannot relate to diverse human beings or bend with circumstance. Though

physically indomitable, his character is narrow, inflexible, and brittle. These flaws make him a failure as a strategist.

In this article, we explore the strengths and weaknesses of three strategists introduced in *Coriolanus*: a warrior out of place in the domestic politics of a democratic republic; demagogues who sacrifice national security for political gain; and a gifted statesman of a second-tier power with ambitions to something higher. Along the way, we observe how Shakespeare seems to suggest a common solution to all three situations, perhaps one he took from Plutarch, and one Conner certainly took from Shakespeare: Strategy should begin with the analysis of character. It demands a comprehensive appreciation of human nature and its purposes, one broader and more liberal than the strategists in the play exhibit.

## The Play

*Coriolanus* is one of Shakespeare's later plays, begun, as best we can tell, in 1608. It follows the rise and exile of the Roman patrician Caius Martius, who will become Coriolanus. A formidable asset against Rome's enemies, Coriolanus also threatens the political liberties of ordinary Roman citizens. Consequently, he is exiled by the democratic element of the Roman state. In the same way that the prequel *Henry IV* explores the origins of the strife that wracks *Henry VI*, *Coriolanus* explores the tensions that later devoured the Rome of *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, including how these tensions were set in motion four centuries before. Thus, where *Caesar* is about a twilight republic on the verge of despotism, and *Antony* the empire that came after, *Coriolanus* concerns the struggles of a vibrant republic to forge its constitution while preserving its security.

The play opens with a plebeian uprising protesting the cost of food and Rome's interminable wars. Menenius, a nobleman and Roman senator, attempts to persuade the people to disperse. Martius enters the scene, upbraiding the common people as "scabs," cowards, and ingrates, unworthy to criticize their

5 Robert Gates, "Reflections on Leadership," *Parameters* 38, no. 2 (Summer 2008): 5. Adm. Winnefeld quoted in Michael E. O'Hanlon, *The Future of Land Warfare* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2015), 139.

6 When Eisenhower attended West Point, its curriculum had a very heavy emphasis on engineering. It was this confined education Conner sought to counteract. Theodore J. Crackel, *West Point: A Bicentennial History* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002).

7 It even makes an appearance in *The Hunger Games*. The aristocratic villain, who looks on the plebs of the districts as contemptuous vermin, is named Coriolanus Snow.

8 Shakespeare would have read this in North's translation of Plutarch's lives. Plutarch, "Life of Caius Martius Coriolanus," in *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*, trans. Thomas North (Hertfordshire, UK: Wordsworth Classics, 1998), 135. For Shakespeare's use of Plutarch, see, Peter Ackroyd, *Shakespeare: The Biography* (New York: Anchor, 2005).

# In our age of populist revolts and unsettled norms, Coriolanus might be the most politically relevant of all Shakespeare's plays.

noble leaders.<sup>9</sup> Neither Menenius nor Martius succeeds in breaking up the mob. Instead, the crowd disperses only when the Senate grants them political power through five popularly elected tribunes, who will represent the plebs in Roman politics.

Immediately afterward, we learn that the Volsces have invaded Roman territory. Martius is “glad on’t” and hopes that the coming war will allow Rome to unite against a common foe instead of devouring itself.<sup>10</sup> Martius acquits himself well in the ensuing fight: He almost single-handedly captures the Volscian city of Corioles, for which valor the Senate awards him the cognomen Coriolanus. Coriolanus then fights and drives off Tullus Aufidius, the foremost Volscian general, completing a decisive victory over the invaders.

Fresh from these victories, Coriolanus is persuaded to seek the consulship, the highest office Rome could bestow. However, ascent to this office requires the “voices” of the common people, and aspirants must humble themselves in the marketplace before the commons. Initially hesitant, Coriolanus submits to this humiliation. The people give their consent, and he prepares to take up the consulship. However, the Tribunes, seeing Cori-

olanus as a threat to their newly created offices, convince the populace to withdraw their approval. Coriolanus flies into a rage and denounces both the Tribunes and the people. The confrontation ends with the exile of Coriolanus from Rome.

In exile, Coriolanus plots his revenge. He seeks out the Volsces and joins with Aufidius. At the head of a Volscian army, Coriolanus comes to the gates of Rome. After rebuffing several Roman envoys, he finally relents when his mother, Volumnia, begs him to spare the city. Coriolanus returns to the Volscian assembly with a treaty favorable to their interests, but Aufidius mocks him for yielding to the tears of a few women. Aufidius and his partisans then mob and kill Coriolanus, concluding the tragedy.

There are three key strategists in this play. Each is exceptional in a certain sphere, but each is also deficient. Coriolanus, though irreplaceable in tactical engagements, is elevated beyond his competence and hamstrung by the narrowness of his education. The Tribunes of the People, Brutus and Sicinius, are Machiavels *par excellence*, but ones whose cynicism blinds them to the diversity of human motives. Aufidius would be a statesman of singular caliber, yet, by an accident of birth, he lacks a dynamic and complex political community in which his talents might develop. Each suffers some insufficiency, some imperfection, which limits his ability to formulate and execute a viable grand strategy — for unlike a mere military man or demagogue, the grand strategist must understand and move between all aspects of state power.

## Shakespeare and International Relations Theory

One challenge to taking character seriously in the study of strategy comes from our subfield, international relations. In this article, we argue that Shakespeare should be considered a strategic thinker. Fittingly for the man who, with some exaggeration, “invented the human,” Shakespeare’s main contribution to strategic wisdom is his exploration of character and its relationship to strategy. Within international relations, however, the study of individuals — “the first image,” in the parlance of international relations theory — has languished for decades. A famous article enjoins, “Let us now praise great men,” but its clarion call

9 *Coriolanus*, I.i.165. Unless otherwise noted, all citations are to the *Riverside Shakespeare*. William Shakespeare, *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd ed., ed. G. Blakemore Evans and J.J. M. Tobin (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1996).

10 *Coriolanus*, I.i.224–25.



sounded for a deaf discipline:<sup>11</sup> In the past ten years, less than 15 percent of all articles published on the topic of international relations studied *anything* related to the first image.<sup>12</sup>

In international relations theory, the declining study of individuals closely follows the rise of neorealism, a theory attaching the greatest causal weight to the international system. Neorealism simplifies the world by assuming that states are unitary and rational; it holds that this approach can explain most conflict and cooperation between great powers. Neorealism, of course, is not the only approach to strategy, nor even the dominant one. However, much of the scholarship produced in its wake retains its rationalist framework. For instance, liberal institutionalists study how rational states can use international norms and bodies to overcome inefficiencies in their interactions, and theorists of the democratic peace often stress the role of rational substate actors in constraining regime belligerence.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, constructivists reject a rationality assumption, but they often retain realism's emphasis on structure.<sup>14</sup> For the first image, the implication of all these approaches is the same: A strong emphasis on either rationality or structure tends to leave individuals in the shade.

This neglect is not necessarily intentional. Some theorists do seem hostile to first-image explanations, like Kenneth Waltz, who dismissed human

nature and individual figures as unimportant to the study of international politics.<sup>15</sup> Others, though — including many realists<sup>16</sup> — are much more amenable to the first image, with some seminal works in security studies centering on careful examinations of individual leaders.<sup>17</sup> In the broader discipline, there now exist game theoretic, psychological, and quantitative approaches, as well.<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, these works can safely be called unusual.

If we want to reinvigorate the study of the first image, perhaps one of the first places we should turn is literature — where characters have received far more sustained scrutiny than structures or rational agents. Having neglected the first image for so long, international relations theory has struggled to congeal a new tradition of studying the individual, but novelists and playwrights suffer no such impediment.<sup>19</sup> Much like scholars importing established research programs from psychology, rather than beginning from scratch, we import a long-established tradition from creative fiction. And where better to start than with Shakespeare, who perhaps more than any other author understood human character in its manifold political contexts?<sup>20</sup>

In fact, we argue that Shakespeare not only takes strategy seriously, he takes *realist* strategy seriously. He seems aware of the realist temptation to oversimplify human nature in order to try to understand the world, and he offers fair-

11 Daniel L. Byman and Kenneth M. Pollack, "Let Us Now Praise Great Men: Bringing the Statesman Back In," *International Security* 25, no. 4 (Spring 2001): 107–46, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3092135>.

12 The TRIP project at the College of William & Mary tracks the number of articles in major political science journals studying individuals and their relationships to foreign affairs. The number cited here, 15 percent, includes any article that takes the first image seriously: whether qualitative studies of particular leaders, quantitative regressions on psychological variables, or anything in between.

13 Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 67.

14 Alexander Wendt is explicit on this point, and while he significantly expands Waltz's conception of structure, if anything, he strengthens the emphasis international relations theory places on the structure instead of the individual. Consider this claim: "I argue that most of the attributes we normally associate with individuals have to do with the social terms of their individuality rather than their individuality per se, and these are culturally constituted." Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 42.

15 "The enduring anarchic character of international politics accounts for the striking sameness in the quality of international life through the millennia, a statement that will meet with wide assent," said Waltz, with a certain naiveté. Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979), 66.

16 Peter D. Feaver et al., "Brother, Can You Spare a Paradigm? (Or Was Anybody Ever a Realist?)," *International Security* 25, no. 1 (Summer 2000): 165–93, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1162/016228800560426>.

17 See, for instance, Eliot A. Cohen, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2012).

18 For a recent sampling, see, Michael C. Horowitz and Allan C. Stam, "How Prior Military Experience Influences the Future Militarized Behavior of Leaders," *International Organization* 68, no. 3 (Summer 2014): 527–59, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43282118>; Dominic D.P. Johnson and Dominic Tierney, "The Rubicon Theory of War: How the Path to Conflict Reaches the Point of No Return," *International Security* 36, no. 1 (Summer 2011): 7–40, [https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00043](https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00043); Jennifer Mitzen and Randall L. Schweller, "Knowing the Unknown Unknowns: Misplaced Certainty and the Onset of War," *Security Studies* 20, no. 1 (2011): 2–35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2011.549023>; and, Scott Wolford and Emily Hencken Ritter, "National Leaders, Political Security, and the Formation of Military Coalitions," *International Studies Quarterly* 60, no. 3 (September 2016): 540–51, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sq023>.

19 The discipline of international relations as it emerged in the interwar period began (at least in part) with the study of statesmanship. The study of individuals, then, is not so much a new frontier as a fallow one.

20 It is worth noting that the economist Michael Chwe makes a similar argument, though he suggests economists turn to folk tales and Jane Austen. His reason is compelling: "Game theory develops distinctively among the subordinate and oppressed," which means that, in some areas, these traditions will have advanced beyond their formal study in the discipline proper: "We are still catching up to her [Austen's] insights." Michael Suk-Young Chwe, *Game Theorist* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 2, 32.

ly clear suggestions for how a strategist should and should not go about this task. He even seems aware of a nascent rational-choice approach to strategy, and he treats it with skepticism.

## Defining Grand Strategy

Grand strategy is the highest level of policymaking. That is not to say grand strategy is the most difficult or the most noble. Rather, it directs (or should direct) strategies and tactics at lower levels of the state. It summarizes the way a nation and its leadership try to reconcile their means and their ends within a single, coherent approach to policy formation.

Popularized by B.H. Liddell Hart, the term originated in the interwar period. Before the Great War, military thinkers used the word “tactics” to talk about maneuvering troops to win a battle, and they used the word “strategy” to talk about using battles to win a war, but they lacked a term to talk about using wars to achieve political goals. After World War I slipped all bounds of political restraint, historians and practitioners realized the need for a word to relate war to the kind of peace it sought to achieve.

Liddell Hart defined grand strategy in this way: “to co-ordinate and direct all the resources of a nation, or band of nations, towards the attainment of the political object of the war.”<sup>21</sup> Liddell Hart’s usage was adopted, and the phrase came to apply more broadly both to peacetime and to war. While there is no universally accepted definition of grand

strategy,<sup>22</sup> they all seem to share a family resemblance that makes the term useful and increasingly common.<sup>23</sup> Sometimes, the phrase refers to an activity, as in Liddell Hart’s definition. Other times, it refers to something cerebral, such as “a state’s theory about how it can best ‘cause’ security for itself.”<sup>24</sup> Historian Hal Brands offers perhaps the most elegant definition:

Reduced to its essence, grand strategy is the intellectual architecture that lends structure to foreign policy; it is the logic that helps states navigate a complex and dangerous world.<sup>25</sup>

However we define the concept, two points are clear: First, grand strategy is a kind of framework by which a country relates to (and perhaps reshapes) its threat environment. Second, the practice of grand strategy predates the phrase by millennia.

## Why Shakespeare’s Rome?

Before beginning to explore the grand strategic insights of Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*, we must offer a brief defense of literature as a legitimate storehouse from which to draw ideas about politics. Both scholars and practitioners emphasize the study of literature as essential to mastering grand strategy.<sup>26</sup> John Lewis Gaddis argues that the strategist, and especially the teacher of strategy, should rely primarily on narrative, whether historical or otherwise: “We need to see change happen, and we can do that only by reconstituting the past as histories, biographies,

21 B.H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1956), 335–36.

22 Nina Silove, “Beyond the Buzzword: The Three Meanings of ‘Grand Strategy,’” *Security Studies* 27, no. 1 (2018): 27–57, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2017.1360073>. See also, Rebecca Friedman Lissner, “What Is Grand Strategy? Sweeping a Conceptual Minefield,” *Texas National Security Review* 2, no. 1 (November 2018): 53–73, <http://dx.doi.org/10.26153/tsw/868>.

23 The study of grand strategy has stubbornly resisted theorizing. Despite attempts to dice the subject into abstractions and jargon, the best and definitive works on grand strategy all remain historical, even classical, in their approach. John Lewis Gaddis begins his recent book, *On Grand Strategy* (New York: Penguin Press, 2018), by stressing his atheoretical and impressionistic approach to the subject, and his approach typifies the field. This lack of rigorous theorizing has led some thinkers to argue the idea must be vacuous or self-contradictory, but it continues to gain currency with popular, academic, and professional audiences. See, Richard K. Betts, “Is Strategy an Illusion?” *International Security* 25, no. 2 (Fall 2000): 5–50, <https://doi.org/10.1162/016228800560444>.

24 Barry R. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany Between the World Wars* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), 13.

25 Hal Brands, *What Good Is Grand Strategy?: Power and Purpose in American Statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), 1. Note that Brands’ definition helpfully contrasts grand strategy with foreign policy, with which it is often confused. It would be absurd to say something like, “employing airstrikes against Libya was not part of Barack Obama’s foreign policy” — they happened at his direction, and they occurred overseas, making them both foreign and policy. But it would not be absurd to say, “Airstrikes against Libya were not part of Barack Obama’s grand strategy” — they might have been incidental or even contradictory to his overall approach to foreign policy, as in fact, Obama came to believe that they were. Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine,” *The Atlantic* (April 2016): 7–90, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>.

26 The first chapter of Gaddis’ *On Grand Strategy* canvasses Isaiah Berlin, Tolstoy, Stephen Spielberg’s film *Lincoln*, and Homer — along with a lucid discussion of Xerxes’ crossing to Greece. In the preface to *Liberal Leviathan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), G. John Ikenberry (briefly) meditates on the film, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*. And Charles Hill spends virtually all of *Grand Strategies* applying the lessons of fiction to world order. (With John Lewis Gaddis and Paul Kennedy, Charles Hill pioneered Yale’s program on grand strategy, which was among the first of its kind.) For all these authors, a work of fiction is not a mere illustration, a way to keep their audience entertained. Rather, it is a source of wisdom.

poems, plays, novels, or films. The best of these... are, in short, *dramatizations*.”<sup>27</sup> Fox Conner agreed. Before introducing Eisenhower to heavier works on history and strategy, Conner began Eisenhower’s strategic education with historical novels.<sup>28</sup> Charles Hill argues that “literary insight is essential for statecraft” because “both endeavors are concerned with important questions...only partly accessible to rational thought...a purely rational or technocratic approach is likely to lead one astray.”<sup>29</sup> Indeed, for Hill, literature is not just a complement to social science — it is almost a substitute.

Gaddis and Hill both argue that, to appreciate the coherence and evolution of grand strategy, one must study narrative. Thus, their emphasis on literature, while similar to that of an historian or philosopher, is also more limited: They are less interested in what a novel might reveal about its time and more interested in what it can say about the present. They suggest that, by submerging in these narratives, students come away with a better understanding of the present than they could acquire from abstract theorizing. Even if students of grand strategy do not attain a knowledge that lends itself to clear concepts and precise definitions, they will still be better strategists. In fact, important research into the mindset of grand strategists suggests that the best grand strategists may be those least enamored of abstract theoretical frameworks.<sup>30</sup>

Policymakers seem aware of this fact. Another reason to study strategy with literature is that it in-

tensifies knowledge with lived experience. “Training schools in intelligence,” wrote CIA director Allen Dulles, emphasize the case method “in order to give the future intelligence officer not only knowledge, but experience and confidence.”<sup>31</sup> Quoting the historian Michael Howard, National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster made this point at the Naval Academy in 2018, arguing that broad historical study prepared not just the minds but the psyches and characters of officers — a vital function, since an officer is like “a swimmer who had to spend his whole life practicing on dry land.”<sup>32</sup> Current policymakers echo this sentiment, and they seem to wish that political science produced more such scholarship.<sup>33</sup>

To these arguments, we might add a final one. Although we should be cautious when deriving lessons from fiction, classic stories have a claim to truth. A classic likely bears a strong resemblance to reality — it has verisimilitude — because if it did not, it would not have endured. A reader will suspend disbelief only so far, and so every time someone rereads a story, the reader tacitly affirms that its underlying view of how the world works does not greatly offend his or her own experience.<sup>34</sup> The fact that a classic tale survived speaks to its truthfulness. We might even go so far as to claim that we should trust a classic play more than a revisionist history. That said, we must also recognize that studies of fiction do not lend themselves to strict reproducibility.<sup>35</sup>

So why Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*? Because Co-

27 Gaddis, *On Grand Strategy*, 16. Drawing on Clausewitz, Gaddis emphasizes the pedagogical function of fiction: Its purpose is to distill the essence of past wisdom so that students do not have to learn all of history to anticipate how people will behave. Note that Gaddis’ argument differs subtly from that of Daniel and Musgrave, who argue we need to study fiction and film to understand how people who have consumed that fiction think. J. Furman Daniel III and Paul Musgrave, “Synthetic Experiences: How Popular Culture Matters for Images of International Relations,” *International Studies Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (September 2017): 503–16, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqx053>.

28 Smith, *Eisenhower in War and Peace*, 65.

29 Hill, *Grand Strategies*, 7. By “technocratic,” Hill seems to have in mind a certain scientism which mistakes policymaking for a kind of engineering.

30 Gaddis, *On Grand Strategy*, 9. He is discussing Tetlock’s findings about expert predictions.

31 Allen W. Dulles, *The Craft of Intelligence: America’s Legendary Spy Master on the Fundamentals of Intelligence Gathering for a Free World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 178. For a similar argument, see, Eliot A. Cohen, “The Historical Mind and Military Strategy,” *Orbis* 49, no. 4 (Autumn 2005): 575–88, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2005.07.002>.

32 H.R. McMaster, “Remarks by LTG H.R. McMaster at the United States Naval Academy,” The White House, Jan. 21, 2018, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-ltg-h-r-mcmaster-united-states-naval-academy>. McMaster also argues against using history as an “exact playbook” and for using it to form the intellect to ask questions in the right way. An even stronger argument comes from Jon Sumida’s explication of Alfred Thayer Mahan: He argues that “the formulation of theory...was either secondary or hostile to the accomplishment of Mahan’s primary task.” Jon Tetsuro Sumida, *Inventing Grand Strategy and Teaching Command: The Classic Works of Alfred Thayer Mahan Reconsidered* (Washington, DC: The Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1997), xv.

33 Paul C. Avey and Michael C. Desch, “What Do Policymakers Want from Us? Results of a Survey of Current and Former Senior National Security Decision Makers,” *International Studies Quarterly* 58, no. 2 (June 2014): 227–46, <https://doi.org/10.1111/isqu.12111>. In a related study, Campbell and Desch gauge the level of policy engagement among political scientists in the United States. Peter Campbell and Michael C. Desch, “Ranking Relevance: Which Universities Rise and Which Fall in International Relations?” *New America Foundation*, Nov. 27, 2018, <https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/reports/ranking-relevance/>.

34 Of course, some stories, such as science fiction, will deviate radically from reality in certain ways. To be convincing, we would argue, the characters in these stories must therefore be that much truer to life. After all, *Harry Potter* is about three of the most common types of people. What the book sacrifices in distorting the laws of physics, it compensates for in the ordinariness of its heroes.

35 We thank an anonymous reviewer for this point. Approaching Shakespeare as we have done cannot guarantee that another political scientist would be able to reproduce our results in the same way that running a model on the same dataset would produce the same correlations. The source material and method can, however, offer the conclusions a claim to external validity that a dataset or regression might lack.

*riolanus* clearly explores the relationship between international and domestic politics. It centers on the conflict between elites and the people, especially how this conflict shapes and is shaped by the quest for national security. Reconciling domestic and international politics is the most difficult challenge facing grand strategy, and nowhere does Shakespeare engage this theme more directly than in *Coriolanus*.

## **The Flower of Warriors**

*So our virtues/Lie in th'interpretation of the time*<sup>36</sup>

Before the actor George C. Scott immortalized him in front of Old Glory, Gen. George S. Patton, Jr., had already captured America's imagination. His courage, irascibility, and enormous personality made him a public icon. But while a great tactical commander, Patton was thoroughly unsuited to strategic and political thinking. He disrupted allied unity with divisive comments about the Russians not taking part in the division of the postwar world.<sup>37</sup> Subsequently, after ill-advised remarks on denazification, Patton was removed from the military administration of Bavaria.<sup>38</sup> He displayed a violent temper: Twice he slapped an American soldier in the face and, consequently, was almost relieved of his command. Despite these character flaws, Eisenhower kept Patton in the war for one reason: He was irreplaceable as a combat commander, "one of the guarantors of our victory."<sup>39</sup> Yet, once the fighting was over, Patton was finished.<sup>40</sup> As Clausewitz observes, some leaders are suited to the bloody engagements at the tactical level of war, and some are suited to the strategic level. "No case is more common," he writes, "than that of the officer whose energy declines as he rises in rank and fills positions that are beyond his abilities."<sup>41</sup> Like *Coriolanus*, Patton's tactical bent and disposition, which made him so indispensable

in the ferocious battles of World War II, made him a liability in strategy and policy.

We know that *Coriolanus* (the man) was of unique interest to Shakespeare, as no other playwright of his time wrote about this Roman.<sup>42</sup> It is worth asking what in *Coriolanus*' story Shakespeare found so arresting. The playwright may have seen connections between the story of *Coriolanus* and his own times. In fact, he weaves contemporary events into *Coriolanus*. Act I opens on a riot over food shortages, and this mob sets the stage for one of the play's main themes: the clash between the common people and the political elite. Shakespeare's London was rife with similar clashes, where food riots over the cost of staples like fish and butter were common.<sup>43</sup> The year before he wrote *Coriolanus*, authorities had bloodily suppressed the Midland's Rising, which involved disaffected farmers. Tellingly, no food riots occur in Plutarch's *Life of Coriolanus*, Shakespeare's main historical source for the play.<sup>44</sup> It seems Shakespeare saw parallels between early Rome and the politics of his own time, and he deliberately altered the historical narrative to highlight them.<sup>45</sup>

With typical penetration, Shakespeare explores the strengths and flaws of *Coriolanus*' character. In this essay, we focus on one: how *Coriolanus*' education formed his character, and what the near- and long-term consequences of such an education would be for Roman strategy.

With his father killed in Rome's wars, Caius Martius was raised by his mother, Volumnia. From a young age, preparing for war consumed Martius. He bent his whole will to becoming physically unassailable. He succeeded so well that no contemporary Roman could match him in contests of strength, and, as even the common people acknowledged, he was "a scourge to [the] enemies" of the republic.<sup>46</sup> Shaped by this bloody education, Martius was held in the highest regard by the Roman nobility, and Shakespeare has them praise Martius as the ideal Roman

36 *Coriolanus*, IV.vii.49–50.

37 Smith, *Eisenhower in War and Peace*, 339–40.

38 Smith, *Eisenhower in War and Peace*, 453–54. In fact, Eisenhower said that he removed Patton from the military administration of Bavaria not only because of what he said about ex-Nazis: "Actually, I'm not moving George for what he's done—just for what he's going to do next." According to Ike, Patton was a master at "missing opportunities to keep his mouth shut." Smith, *Eisenhower in War and Peace*, 453–54.

39 Smith, *Eisenhower in War and Peace*, 282–88.

40 Smith, *Eisenhower in War and Peace*, 454.

41 Clausewitz, *On War*, 110–11, 122.

42 More typically, Shakespeare drew his heroes from ones in common use, such as Julius Caesar and Marc Antony.

43 Ackroyd, *Shakespeare*, 280–81.

44 Ackroyd, *Shakespeare*, 468–69. Shakespeare also drew on Plutarch's *Lives of Caesar and of Brutus* for *Julius Caesar*.

45 For other potential ways in which Shakespeare altered his source to examine Machiavellian ideas, see, Patrick Thomas Ashby, "The Changing Faces of Virtue: Plutarch, Machiavelli and Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*," *Early Modern Literary Studies* (2016).

46 *Coriolanus*, II. iii. 91.





soldier of “Cato’s wish.” “Thou worthiest Martius!... Flower of warriors.”<sup>47</sup> Martius’ valor is undeniable and Shakespeare clearly admires his sense of honor and modesty.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, the Roman nobles regarded him with such honor, according to Plutarch, because they considered “valor the chiefest virtue” — an opinion Shakespeare puts in the mouth of Cominius (one of the two consuls), but which he takes almost verbatim from Plutarch’s *Lives*.<sup>49</sup>

from a more complete education: “The greatest benefit that learning bringeth men unto,” Plutarch argues, is that “it teacheth men that be rude and rough of nature, by compass and rule of reason, to be civil and courteous, and to like better the mean state, than the higher.”<sup>52</sup> By nature, Coriolanus was “rough,” and his exclusively martial education enflamed rather than tamed his roughness and pride. He became willful and choleric when friend or foe

pricked his sense of honor.<sup>53</sup>

Coriolanus’ education made him well suited to battle, where physical strength, courage, and indomitability are key. Conversely, in the realm of domestic politics, where compromise preserves

## Though the Romans praise martial education and valor, many seem not to appreciate its adverse effects on character and the future leaders of their republic.

Despite his many virtues, Coriolanus suffers a number of character flaws, flaws which at least in part stem from his overly martial education. These flaws prove fatal handicaps when he attempts to move beyond the level of military tactics to the level of grand strategy. Shakespeare would have read in Plutarch that “for lack of education, he was so choleric and impatient, that he would yield to no living creature: which made him churlish, uncivil, and altogether unfit for any man’s conversation... they could not be acquainted with him, as one citizen useth to be with another in the city.”<sup>50</sup> As Menenius puts it in the play: “he has been bred i’t’h wars/ Since a could draw a sword, and is ill school’d/ In bolted [tactful] language.”<sup>51</sup> Plutarch explicitly identifies the benefits Coriolanus would have received

stability and humility helps one adapt old traditions to changing balances of political power, such inflexibility can lead to disaster — not least because the enemies of such an inflexible character can manipulate it to their advantage. (In the next section, we discuss how the Tribunes did just this.)

This overly martial education is not limited to one generation. We learn that Coriolanus’ son is being educated in the same manner. As Volumnia notes, “He had rather see the sword and hear a drum, than/look upon his schoolmaster.”<sup>54</sup> In one anecdote, the boy chases a butterfly, seeming to admire its beauty, but then flies into a rage and “mammocked” it, tearing it to shreds.<sup>55</sup> The response from Volumnia and Coriolanus’ wife Virgilia is telling: Volumnia says that the boy was taken

47 *Coriolanus*, I.iv.57; I.v.25; I.vi.33.

48 Given the man’s overweening pride, it is easy to overlook Coriolanus’ modesty, but Shakespeare clearly draws our attention to it. For instance, Coriolanus prefers *not* to advertise his scars and his deeds, as he makes plain many times. The Tribunes say he boasts (II.i.19–20), but this is simply false. At every turn, Coriolanus insists, “praise me not” (I.v.17); “pray now, no more: my mother...when she does praise me, grieves me. I have done/As you have done” (I.ix.13–15), and “I have some wounds upon me, and they smart/to hear themselves remembered” (I.ix.28–29); “No more of this, it does offend my heart” (II.i.169); “I had rather have my wounds to heal again/Than hear say how I got them” (II.ii.68–69). Volumnia and the patricians brag about Coriolanus, but the man himself does not: “You shall not be the grave of your deserving,” says Cominius, “Rome must know the value of her own...Too modest are you.” (I.ix.19–21, 54).

49 *Coriolanus*, II.ii.84. Plutarch, “Life of Caius Martius Coriolanus,” 138.

50 Plutarch, “Life of Caius Martius Coriolanus,” 135.

51 *Coriolanus*, III.i.318–20.

52 Plutarch, “Life of Caius Martius Coriolanus,” 138.

53 Not all who receive such a martial education exhibit the same weakness as Coriolanus. His education interacted with his nature and produced a character that is ill suited to political compromise and to the life of a citizen. Some characters in the play argue that his choler is part of his nature and cannot be helped, but they fail to perceive the role that his education had in enflaming rather than taming this part of his nature. As we discuss, other Romans, such as Cominius, clearly display the good character traits brought out by a more complete education — traits like humility, tact, and prudence.

54 *Coriolanus*, I.iii.55–56.

55 *Coriolanus*, I.iii.57–65.

by “One on’s father’s moods,” and Virgilia exclaims, “Indeed, la, ‘tis a noble child.”<sup>56</sup> Rome is imparting the same education to the son as to the father, reproducing the same choleric temperament in the next generation of Roman noblemen. Though the Romans praise martial education and valor, many seem not to appreciate its adverse effects on character and the future leaders of their republic. Here, Shakespeare presages the rise of Roman general-statesmen like Scipio, Sulla, and Caesar.

But what does this have to do with strategy and grand strategy? Strategists, as Conner recognizes, are molded by their education. Paradoxically, Coriolanus’ warlike education, and the character and skills it produced, handicap him at both the strategic and tactical levels of war.

At the strategic level, Coriolanus’ education did not prepare him to be a leader of armies. He has the talents not of a general but of a captain. He is not present when the consuls devise the Roman strategy to confront the Volscian invasion. He enters their council after the fact and is told to “follow Cominius.”<sup>57</sup> Once he takes the city of Corioles, his superiors redirect him toward the rest of the Volscian host. Coriolanus is a tactical leader who fights in the bloodiest engagements. While essential, such figures rarely make strategic leaders. Like an arrow in a bow, the Roman strategists nock and loose him at their targets. Coriolanus does not decide where he will be aimed.

That Shakespeare appreciated this deficiency in Coriolanus is shown in the play’s list of roles. There, Shakespeare does not include Coriolanus as one of the “generals against the Volscians,” reserving that for Cominius and Titus Lartius.<sup>58</sup> In the play, only when Coriolanus leads a foreign army to the gates of Rome is he called “general,”<sup>59</sup> and even then he is a general not of the Romans but of the Volscies. In an exchange between Menenius and the Volscian watchmen, the latter refer to Coriolanus as “general” many times, yet Menenius slips and calls him “captain” (the watchmen object and Menenius corrects himself, saying “I mean thy general”).<sup>60</sup> In

fact, Menenius is closer to the truth. Coriolanus is unsuited to generalship: He is a captain, a tactical leader in battle, not a general, a strategic leader in war. Though praised by his city, his education — focused on single combat and physical endurance — makes him ill suited to higher-level tasks. Instead, the consuls craft a strategy and then loose Coriolanus on the enemy. Even when Coriolanus is victorious at the head of the Volscies, Shakespeare makes it clear that Aufidius is the strategist and Coriolanus his instrument.

That Coriolanus is no strategist makes sense. More surprisingly, though, is that Coriolanus’ aggressive character also has drawbacks at the tactical level of war. Most notably, it makes him ill suited to tactical maneuvers like a fighting withdrawal. When Martius — he had not yet received his honorary name — joins Cominius’ troops, the consul has just orchestrated a fighting retreat. Such delaying actions are essential in both tactics and strategy: When facing “odds beyond arithmetic... manhood is call’d foolery when it stands/Against a falling fabric.”<sup>61</sup> Cominius went on the defensive until troops from another Roman force could shift the odds in his favor. Martius looks on such maneuvers as cowardly, and he confronts Cominius about it when he joins the consul after the fall of Corioles:

*Martius:* “Are you lords o’th’field?/If not why cease you till you are so.”

*Cominius:* “Martius, we have at disadvantage fought,/And did retire to win our purpose.”<sup>62</sup>

Such calculations appear beneath Martius’ concept of valor. He immediately asks that Cominius set him against Tullus Aufidius and his Antiades, the most powerful Volscian force.<sup>63</sup> Martius prefers the direct approach in tactics and scorns the delaying methods Cominius employs to great success. Even on the battlefield, then, Coriolanus’ martial upbringing leaves him a second-rate tactician.

Finally, although personally indomitable, Cori-

56 *Coriolanus*, I.i.66–67.

57 *Coriolanus*, I.i.246.

58 Note that the title “general” here is not simply an Anglicization of the Roman title of consul: Tullus Aufidius, too, is called “*genera/* of the Volscians.” Shakespeare, *Coriolanus*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 1444. As well, in another place, Cominius is called “present consul and last general,” showing that Shakespeare considered these two roles distinct (II. ii.43). Finally, the stage directions that Shakespeare wrote for *Coriolanus* are famously detailed, so this omission of the title of “general” for Coriolanus was not likely an oversight on the playwright’s part.

59 *Coriolanus*, V.ii.5, 9, 14, 29, 36, 48, 54.

60 *Coriolanus*, V.ii.51–54.

61 *Coriolanus*, III.i.244–46.

62 *Coriolanus*, I.vi.47–50.

63 *Coriolanus*, I.vi.55–60.



olanus makes a poor leader of the rank and file. His contempt for the common people extends to contempt for the people in arms, the backbone of the Roman army. He derides the common foot soldiers under his command, trying to motivate them through shame and threats. At the siege of Corioles, he harangues the Roman infantry after their initial retreat, saying: “I’ll leave the foe/ And make my wars on you.”<sup>64</sup> Advancing on the town and trying to rouse them from their hiding place, he exclaims, “Mark me, and do the like!”<sup>65</sup> — but the soldiers do not follow him, and the Volscles lock Martius within the city, where he must fend for himself.<sup>66</sup> Only when Titus Lartius appears do the Roman soldiers assault and take the city, finding a bloodied Martius emerging at the gate after fighting alone.<sup>67</sup>

Later, Cominius asks Martius how Corioles fell. Martius’ contempt for the common soldier resurfaces when he downplays their role in the final sacking of the city.<sup>68</sup> He tells Cominius that the rank and file were beaten back to their trenches and that, if not for the nobles, Corioles would not have fallen. But this is not true: Lartius led the rank and file in an assault on the city after Martius’ brief solo fight. When Cominius asks how the city was taken if the infantry did not eventually attack, Martius leaves the question unanswered and changes the subject, perhaps unwilling to recognize the role the common soldiers played.<sup>69</sup> As Cominius more accurately recounts later, Corioles fell due to “a sudden reinforcement” after Martius “struck Corioles like a planet.”<sup>70</sup>

Contrast the leadership of Coriolanus with that of Cominius. On the other side of the battlefield, Cominius tells his soldiers to rest. He even calls them “friends” and “my fellows.”<sup>71</sup> His treatment of his soldiers motivates them more effectively

than Martius’ browbeating. For example, when Cominius offers Martius volunteers from among the consuls’ men to go where the fighting is hottest, their response is overwhelming: “All: O me alone! Make you a sword of me!”<sup>72</sup> He has so many volunteers, in fact, that Martius says he can only take the very best.<sup>73</sup> Whereas Martius’ shaming of the rank and file led to his entrapment in Corioles alone, Cominius’ soldiers, whose lives the general did not spend cheaply in pursuit of his own honor, are supremely motivated.

The ability of Cominius to inspire the rank and file through magnanimity recalls Henry V among his soldiers before the Battle of Agincourt. Moreover, the stark difference between Coriolanus’ elitist leadership and Henry V’s common touch might have its origin in their different educations. Coriolanus was educated among his own class. Henry was educated by Falstaff among the people. Thus, the English king could motivate his outnumbered soldiers just as Cominius did, with understanding, not with fury and derision. In both cases, the result was a better motivated and more effective army.<sup>74</sup>

Achieving concord between the leader of an army and its common soldiery is a perennial problem for strategy. Whether in Rome, Henry V’s England, or America today, an army unites all classes in the pursuit of a national goal — especially in the age of the democratic nation-state.<sup>75</sup> Wartime leaders must recognize and strengthen this interdependent relationship between officers and the rank and file to achieve tactical and strategic objectives. To come full circle: Cominius and Henry V recall to mind Eisenhower among his assembled units before the D-Day invasions. In fact, knowing the role that Shakespeare had in Eisenhower’s strategic education, the supreme commander may have been

64 *Coriolanus*, I.iv.39–40.

65 *Coriolanus*, I.iv.45.

66 *Coriolanus*, I.iv.46–61.

67 *Coriolanus*, I.iv.62–64.

68 *Coriolanus*, I.iv.30–45; I.vi.42–46.

69 *Coriolanus*, I.vi.41–47.

70 *Coriolanus*, II.ii.113–14.

71 *Coriolanus*, I.vi.1–9; I.vi.85.

72 *Coriolanus*, I.vi.76. We use here the Arden edition, as the Riverside attributes this line to Martius himself rather than the soldiers. In any case, the stage directions indicate the enthusiasm with which the Romans take up the charge. William Shakespeare, *Coriolanus*, in *The Arden Edition of the Works of William Shakespeare*, ed. Philip Brockbank (London: Cengage Learning, 2007).

73 *Coriolanus*, I.vi.80–81.

74 Note that Hotspur shares the same strategic deficiency as Coriolanus: Both are great soldiers, but not great generals, and their passions lead them into strategic blunders.

75 Shakespeare beautifully portrays this relationship of mutual dependence in his late comedy *Pericles Prince of Tyre*. King Pericles is shipwrecked on a foreign shore. Bereft of all his possessions, he is taken in by a group of fishermen. In an arresting image of the dependence between leaders and the common people, Shakespeare has the fishermen catch Pericles’ armor in their nets. They haul in this symbol of his nobility and Pericles goes on to use it to restore himself to his throne.

imitating Henry V before yet another crucial battle in the north of France.<sup>76</sup>

Recognition of this interdependent relationship should inspire another character trait key to leadership and lacking in Coriolanus: humility. Earlier we described Coriolanus as modest, and he is. But he lacks self-awareness, and so his modesty never rises to true humility. His overweening love of honor and aristocracy blind him to the ways in which his martial exploits rely on the common citizens who make up the Roman rank and file. In *Coriolanus*, we see this symbolized in the “gown of humility,”<sup>77</sup> which Coriolanus tries to refuse,<sup>78</sup> though Menenius assures him that the “worthiest men have done’t.”<sup>79</sup> In response, Coriolanus mocks the tradition and says “Hang ‘em!”<sup>80</sup> He disdains the people. For Coriolanus, those who share his merits, like Aufidius, are praiseworthy, while all who do not are “beneath abhorring.”<sup>81</sup> Because the plebeians are not like him, he sees them as unworthy to judge him. Making this consulship dependent on the will of the common people and their servants, the Tribunes, debases it. Coriolanus would “rather be their servant in [his] way/Than to sway with them in theirs.”<sup>82</sup>

Coriolanus’ character also makes him incapable of understanding his opponents’ motivations and purposes. Coriolanus disdains motives other than his own, viewing as base anyone who does not possess the same virtues as himself. He sees the world in black and white: Those who reflect his virtues are bright and clear, those who do not are mere shadows of men. However, a key to strategy is the ability to put oneself in an opponent’s position. Sun Tzu argues that the key to victory is to defeat your opponent’s strategy. To achieve this, the strategist must be able to see the world as his opponents do,

if only to discover their goals and frustrate them. This understanding was a key lesson Eisenhower took from Conner. Gen. Andrew J. Goodpaster, a longtime aide to Eisenhower, recounts:

[Eisenhower]’s a tremendous man for analyzing the other fellow’s mind, what options are open to the other fellow, and what line he can best take to capitalize or exploit the possibilities, having figured the options open to the other man. Under Fox Conner... he became keenly interested in the command process, not just the mechanics of it so much as the analysis of what was in the commander’s mind.<sup>83</sup>

Coriolanus appears incapable of this essential strategic practice at which Eisenhower excelled. As it turns out, Coriolanus’ chief political adversary shares this same flaw.

## The Machiavels

*You know neither me, yourselves nor anything*<sup>84</sup>

In *Coriolanus*, Shakespeare does not engage the deeper implications of Machiavellian thinking. Unlike in the *Henrys* or *Hamlet*, there is not the slightest worry in *Coriolanus* that the world lacks moral order. Instead, Shakespeare takes aim at a practical problem with Machiavellian strategy: It doesn’t work.<sup>85</sup>

To be sure, Shakespeare takes aim at a one-dimensional version of Machiavelli, at Machiavelli the cunning rationalist. His target is thus a simplification of the original, yet a highly relevant one to

76 Later, Eisenhower observed: “you do not lead by hitting people over the head. Any damn fool can do that, but it’s usually called ‘assault’ – not ‘leadership.’” Emmet John Hughes, *The Ordeal of Power: A Political Memoir of the Eisenhower Years* (New York: Atheneum, 1963), 124.

77 *Coriolanus*, II.iii.40.

78 *Coriolanus*, II.ii.136–39.

79 *Coriolanus*, II.iii.49.

80 *Coriolanus*, II.iii.50–62. While not mentioned in the play, we know that Cominius and Titus Lartius donned the gown of humility to become consuls.

81 *Coriolanus*, I.i.168.

82 *Coriolanus*, II.i.203–04.

83 Fred I. Greenstein, *The Hidden-Hand Presidency: Eisenhower as Leader* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 26.

84 *Coriolanus*, II.i.67.

85 There is a substantial literature on Shakespeare and Machiavelli. Our purpose here is not to debate whether Machiavelli influenced Shakespeare. Whether or not Shakespeare had Machiavelli specifically in mind, in *Coriolanus* he does critique a Machiavellian approach to strategy, and that critique is incisive. Note that, if one does accept Shakespeare’s familiarity with Machiavelli (though perhaps not with the *Discourses*), then *Coriolanus* would come in the third and final stage of Shakespeare’s engagement with Machiavelli’s thought: *Richard III* represents his first, “lurid” engagement with Machiavelli; the *Henriad* a more complex engagement that wrestles with Machiavelli’s philosophy, even as it ultimately rejects it; and the late Roman plays a final exploration of the tragic nature of politics, where he still rejects Machiavellian thinking but is unsure whether politics can ever escape it. See, Hugh Grady, *Shakespeare, Machiavelli, and Montaigne: Power and Subjectivity from Richard II to Hamlet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 43–46.



international relations scholars, for his critique implicates the foundations of neorealism.<sup>86</sup> Moreover, while a simplification of Machiavelli's thought, the Tribunes are not caricatures. Shakespeare clearly intends his audience to take them seriously, just as he wants us to take Gloucester seriously, for they are all dangerous enemies. Indeed, as with Coriolanus, we can guess that the Tribunes held a special interest for Shakespeare. In Plutarch, these figures are nonentities, barely mentioned at all. In the play, however, Shakespeare makes them fully fledged and significant characters, a dramatic attention that suggests the Bard wanted to explore and critique the strategy (or at least the politics) they embody.<sup>87</sup>

Shakespeare's critique of Machiavellian strategy is not obvious. He gives his Tribunes their due: They are ruthless calculators, rational to a fault, and far more cunning than Coriolanus or even Aufidius.<sup>88</sup> They are not comic Machiavels like Don John in *Much Ado About Nothing*. They are dangerous, highly effective operators who consistently outmaneuver their political enemies.<sup>89</sup> Both Tribunes perceive (accurately) that Coriolanus hates the people and would, if he could, strip them of their newfound power.<sup>90</sup> Unlike the senators, the Tribunes recognize that Coriolanus' talents on the battlefield will not translate to the political arena.<sup>91</sup> They predict how his pride will react to provocation, and they engineer his exile with cynical dexterity.<sup>92</sup> They also understand the mob and how to manipulate it.<sup>93</sup> The Roman aristocrats fear them.<sup>94</sup> They are even strategic in displaying their power: "Let us seem humbler

after it is done/Than when it was a-doing."<sup>95</sup>

The Tribunes' weakness does not lie in their inability to connive or formulate a plan — they excel at both. Rather, they share a key strategic weakness with Coriolanus: an inability to understand what motivates their foes. In their case, the Tribunes impute to others the base motives that govern themselves. In doing so, they render their strategy ineffective.

Courses on grand strategy sometimes begin with this maxim: "Without opposition, strategy is indistinguishable from engineering." The essence of strategy, what separates it from a merely technical discipline, is interaction — the need to condition one's own behavior on that of another actor. War, writes Clausewitz, is a contest of wills. To win, it is necessary to predict how a rival will act: "I am not in control," he writes, and my enemy "dictates to me as much as I dictate to him."<sup>96</sup> Or, in military parlance: The enemy gets a vote. A strategy connects means with ends. If a strategist does not understand the ends an opponent pursues, he will not anticipate the plan his enemy adopts — and the strategist will fail.

From the first scene, the Tribunes misconstrue Martius's motives. They believe he has ambitions for fame, honors, and office. Risibly, they believe that, to achieve these, Martius has deviously preferred a subordinate position to Cominius in Rome's wars abroad: In this way, the general will take the blame if things go awry, while Martius will take the credit if they go well.<sup>97</sup> The Tribunes believe that he is boundlessly ambitious, just like them, and they persist in

86 We take no stance on whether Shakespeare had a more nuanced understanding of Machiavelli. We only argue that in *Coriolanus* Shakespeare criticizes an overly rationalistic approach to strategy. One clear piece of evidence that Machiavelli understood Rome and the motivations of the aristocracy better than Shakespeare's Tribunes is his recognition of glory as a motivating force among the aristocracy. According to Machiavelli, one of the chief achievements of the Tribunes was to crush the glory-seeking few when their ambition for renown endangered the freedom of the many. Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 1.3–6, 2.2, 3.1.

87 Paul A. Cantor, *Shakespeare's Rome: Republic and Empire* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1976), 41, 61–64.

88 Note that Plutarch and Livy portray the Tribunes quite differently: In Livy, the Tribunes save Coriolanus from the mob. In his *Discourses*, Machiavelli lauds the Tribunes "as men of principle whose disinterested application of the law preserves universal liberty." See, John Roe, *Shakespeare and Machiavelli* (Cambridge, UK: Brewer, 2002), 193. Scholars debate whether Shakespeare was familiar with Livy's texts. Whatever the case, he clearly opted to explore Plutarch's depiction of the Tribunes rather than Livy's.

89 Some authors scrupulously observe a difference between the words Machiavel (a simplistic, almost stereotypical villain without a moral compass) and Machiavellian (a more complex, serious character who wrestles with the philosophy and its implications). In this essay, we have not hesitated to refer to Brutus and Sicinius as Machiavels because they seem straightforward and effective mouthpieces of the most ruthless elements of Machiavellian thinking undiluted by ethical deliberation.

90 *Coriolanus*, II.i.223, 246–47.

91 *Coriolanus*, II.i.224–25.

92 *Coriolanus*, II.iii.257–58; III.iii.25–28.

93 *Coriolanus*, II.i.245; II.iii.154–263; III.iii.12–24.

94 *Coriolanus*, IV.vi.122–23.

95 *Coriolanus*, IV.ii.3–4.

96 Clausewitz, *On War*, 77.

97 *Coriolanus*, I.i.271–75. See also Cantor, who in passing remarks: "The low-minded tribunes, assuming that everyone is as duplicitous as they themselves are, see very devious motives behind Coriolanus' acquiescence in the will of the Senate." Cantor, *Shakespeare's Rome*, 43.



**The essence of strategy, what separates it from a merely technical discipline, is interaction — the need to condition one's own behavior on that of another actor.**





this belief throughout the play, despite ample evidence against it.<sup>98</sup> They never recognize the modesty that accompanies Coriolanus' pride, that at every turn he insists "praise me not."<sup>99</sup> Unable to conceive of a man unlike themselves, the Tribunes even attribute his modesty about his deeds and wounds to cunning. True, at his family's urging, he seeks the consulship, but he does not want, as the Tribunes suggest, to overturn the Roman state and become a tyrant. The Tribunes even suggest that Coriolanus does not deserve his honors, a meanness of spirit that denies plain reality: Coriolanus is a proud man of many faults, but he has fought valiantly, and his honors were justly won. Had they understood the limits of his ambition better, they might not have endangered the republic.<sup>100</sup>

In one jibe, Volumnia gives the sharpest précis both of the Tribunes' strengths and of their defects:

They are "Cats, that can judge as fitly of his worth/ As I can of those mysteries which heaven/Will not have earth to know."<sup>101</sup> The Tribunes are as cunning as cats, but also as blind to human complexity and nobility as humans are of divine mysteries. Their cunning and cynicism make them capable of rousing the crowds and exploiting the weaknesses in Coriolanus' character, but these attributes also blind them to his nobility, making his subsequent behavior an enigma to them.

Their inability to understand noble motives has disastrous consequences. The Tribunes are experts at manipulating the mob, and their plan to exile Coriolanus succeeds perfectly. But after Act III, their designs come undone. The Tribunes expect that, without office or powerful friends, Coriolanus will disappear quietly into exile while the life of Rome moves on,<sup>102</sup> that Coriolanus and Aufidius

98 *Coriolanus*, IV.vi.31–32.

99 *Coriolanus*, I.v.16. We have already addressed Coriolanus' modesty (see footnote 48). On the mix of nobility and pride in Coriolanus, we cannot put it better than Ackroyd: "[Shakespeare] had also become more interested in the theatrical possibilities of a particular flaw or weakness in character, whether amorousness in Antony or pride in Coriolanus. Yet as with all of Shakespeare's most important figures, Coriolanus is conceived in ambiguity." Ackroyd, *Shakespeare*, 468.

100 *Coriolanus*, I.i.274.

101 *Coriolanus*, IV.ii.34–36.

102 *Coriolanus*, IV.vi.1–4. Note that the Tribunes fear Coriolanus because "our office, during his power, [will] go sleep" (II.i.223). They would be powerless without their positions, and they seem to assume that Coriolanus will be similarly impotent.

could never reconcile,<sup>103</sup> and that the Volscres, beaten once, would not dare break the peace.<sup>104</sup> They do not understand honor. They do not understand what these proud men will do, untethered. In fact, when word of Coriolanus' approach at the head of a Volscian army reaches them, they assume Coriolanus was deliberately spreading a false rumor in order to return home — despite the fact that neither Coriolanus nor his family has ever displayed such guile.<sup>105</sup> They cannot understand why someone would risk his life for a principle like honor. For them, Coriolanus' use of terms like honor was a façade to disguise his self-interested quest for power, which only tyranny could satisfy.

Importantly, Coriolanus did not change: "the Coriolanus who has found a home and adulation among the Volscians remains, in this other country, the man he always was."<sup>106</sup> As Coriolanus himself foretells, "you shall/Hear from me still, and never of me aught/But what is like me formerly."<sup>107</sup> Had the Tribunes understood this man, they might have better predicted how he would spend his exile.

The Tribunes exhibit a similar shallowness in trying to turn Coriolanus' assault away from the gates of Rome. The Tribunes solicit Menenius, the only politician in the play who might match their craftiness, to entreat Coriolanus to spare Rome, thinking he will sway the man just as he swayed the people.<sup>108</sup> They do not think to ask Coriolanus' wife and mother, whom they disparage,<sup>109</sup> and who undertake their mission of their own initiative.<sup>110</sup> Contrast the Tribunes with Cominius, who recognizes that Menenius will not sway Martius — "He'll never hear him" — but who also hopes that Volum-

nia and Virgilia might prevail.<sup>111</sup> In short, the Tribunes fail to predict how Coriolanus' character will lead him to make war on Rome. They fail to predict how the mutual respect of Coriolanus and Aufidius will allow them to ally. They fail to accept the invasion even when word of it reaches their ears. And they fail to predict what kind of character can (and cannot) sway Coriolanus from his purpose. In fact, in the whole play, the only things they seem capable of predicting are the turns of the mob and the effects of Coriolanus' pride on the citizens. But the importance of honor, nobility, or familial piety — these they never understand.<sup>112</sup>

The Tribunes fail as strategists because they fail to comprehend their opponents. They project onto others their own sordid selves, and so they fail to anticipate how others will actually behave. On their own ground, they are unbeatable. It is the variety and occasional nobility of human emotions that confound them. A modern critic might call this a failure of empathy. Whatever it is, it derives from their Machiavellian approach to strategy: They first reduce the motivations of others to a few, usually vicious desires, and then they plan their own machinations accordingly.

Machiavelli has been called, rightly or wrongly, the first rational choice theorist.<sup>113</sup> More than any previous thinker, he stressed human motivation in order to manipulate it. Much of *The Prince* is about manipulating incentives: inflicting punishments early and once-and-for-all (making them sunk costs) while extending rewards into the future;<sup>114</sup> making people dependent on the prince for their welfare;<sup>115</sup> and, most famously, being feared rather

103 *Coriolanus*, IV.vi.70–73, 101. To be fair to the Tribunes, Menenius also doubts that Coriolanus and Aufidius could ally (IV.vi.87–89), as two such men could not share the heights. In this, the Tribunes and Menenius are more perceptive than either Aufidius or Coriolanus. Aufidius had planned to share "one half of my commission" (IV.v.138) with Coriolanus, only to find himself "darkened in this action" when all "fly to th' Roman," who bears himself "more prouder...than I thought he would" (IV.vii.1–10). Having failed to anticipate how Coriolanus would eclipse him, Aufidius then plots Coriolanus' death. For his part, Coriolanus is blind until the end: He never recognizes that his own excellence might drive others who seek power, or even merely honor, to become his enemies.

104 *Coriolanus*, IV.vi.48.

105 *Coriolanus*, IV.vi.70–71.

106 Anne Barton, *Essays, Mainly Shakespearean* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 156.

107 *Coriolanus*, IV.i.51–53.

108 *Coriolanus*, V.i.33–59.

109 *Coriolanus*, IV.ii.44.

110 *Coriolanus*, V.i.71–73.

111 *Coriolanus*, V.i.62,70.

112 On the meeting of Coriolanus and Aufidius, one thinks of Kipling's "Ballad of East and West," and precisely this sentiment is what the Tribunes cannot grasp:

*But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth,  
When two strong men stand face to face, though they come from the ends of the earth!*

113 It is worth recalling that part of Machiavelli's project is to attack the humanist idea "that it is always rational to be moral...that the rational course of action for the prince to follow will always be the moral one...[in] the moral treatises of Machiavelli's contemporaries we find these arguments tirelessly reiterated." Quentin Skinner, *Machiavelli: A Brief Insight* (New York: Sterling, 2010), 57–58.

114 Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. George Bull (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), chap. 8.

115 Machiavelli, *The Prince*, chap. 9.





than loved (if one cannot be both).<sup>116</sup> His advice is sweeping, and in order to draw his general conclusions he must make similarly general assumptions about what motivates human beings. A theory that allowed a panoply of motives could generate no such clear predictions.<sup>117</sup> Exactly this simplification, this reduction of everyone to a common, low denominator, is what Shakespeare highlights as the grave of the Tribunes' designs.

Machiavelli is particularly relevant to debates over the realist approach to foreign policy. Structural realists frankly assume the simplicity of a Machiavellian world: States are unitary, rational actors, and they seek only one thing — power for the purpose of security.<sup>118</sup> But if Shakespeare is right, then far from being clear-eyed observers, neorealists might be among the most blind strategists of all. For these sorts of cynical generalizations might lead as often to catastrophic error as to success.

Still, a strategist must simplify somewhere.<sup>119</sup> In where he chooses to simplify, we suggest that Shakespeare more closely resembles Sun Tzu than Machiavelli. The Chinese general is often compared to Machiavelli, since both advocate a ruthless, seemingly amoral approach to strategy. In this case, though, the central difference between the two is instructive. Where Machiavelli stresses the manipulation of incentives, Sun Tzu stresses the manipulation of information: "Know thy enemy, and know thyself, and in a hundred battles you will never be in

danger."<sup>120</sup> Where Machiavelli simplifies human motivation, Sun Tzu simplifies the situations in which these motivations might play out.<sup>121</sup>

Sun Tzu stands out among ancient and modern strategists for his obsession with knowledge, and especially knowledge of an enemy's person. In fact, the best espionage for Sun Tzu is not the kind that observes enemy movements but the kind that discovers the thoughts or character of an enemy commander.<sup>122</sup> Contrast this approach with that of the Tribunes, who expend no effort discovering what sort of man their rival is. And why should they? If their approach to strategy is correct, they already know him to be a self-interested man like themselves — seeking out his character would be wasted effort. Shakespeare condemns this attitude. Whatever else he must simplify, the strategist should not simplify the character of an enemy commander.

If it is possible to reconcile Shakespeare's works with a realist approach to strategy — and we believe it is — then this seems to be the answer. *Realpolitik* must begin with a careful study of other nations' motivations, not an assumption of their wretchedness. Strategy must begin with character. It is not enough to presume all states seek power, in the same way that it was not enough for the Tribunes to presume that all men are self-aggrandizing, would-be tyrants. In their critique of structural realism, neoclassical realists make exactly this point: Strategic analysis, they insist, must

116 Machiavelli, *The Prince*, chap. 17. The reasoning behind this famous injunction is essential: "love is secured by a bond of gratitude which men, wretched creatures that they are, break when it is to their advantage to do so; but fear is strengthened by a dread of punishment which is always effective." In essence, Machiavelli is arguing here that men will calculate their interests ("their advantage") and act according to them, regardless of the moral bonds they have formed.

117 If human beings could often be noble or base, fickle or faithful, Machiavelli's already short book of advice would be made even shorter. Take Machiavelli's most infamous example: Is it better to be feared or loved? Feared, the Florentine answers, for men "are fickle...when you are in danger they [will] turn away" (chap. 17). The conclusion only follows because Machiavelli assumes the premise (the ignobility of men) with such assurance. If he allows for a greater diversity of human motives, his theory would produce a far less decisive result. Note that Machiavelli explicitly depends on such a general premise about human motivation: "one can make this generalization about men: they are ungrateful, fickle, liars, and deceivers, they shun danger and are greedy for profit" (chap. 17).

118 "The fifth assumption is that great powers are rational actors," Mearsheimer writes. Legro and Moravcsik identify the rational actor assumption as "the first and least controversial assumption of realism." Waltz is coy about the rational actor assumption, but he still assumes a soft version of it (that systems evolve toward rationality). In all these works, the explicit purpose of the rational-choice assumption is to simplify the world in order to make clear predictions. (If anything, the motivations in structural realism are even simpler than in Machiavelli.) John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), 31. Jeffrey W. Legro and Andrew Moravcsik, "Is Anybody Still a Realist," *International Security* 24, no. 2 (Fall 1999): 12, <https://doi.org/10.1162/016228899560130>.

119 "No matter what the subject, we have to bound the domain of our concern, to organize it, to simplify the materials we deal with, to concentrate on central tendencies, and to single out the strongest propelling forces." Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 68.

120 Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Samuel B. Griffith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), III.31.

121 The classic examples would be his "five fundamental forces" and his classification of "the nine varieties of ground." Note also his emphasis that generals "must create situations which will contribute to their accomplishment" — because the effects of such situations are predictable. His metaphor is music: While the number of melodies is endless, the number of notes is few. Likewise, understanding the few types of forces and terrain and their effects on armies and commanders allows a strategist to understand the infinite variety of ways these forces might combine. Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, I.2–8, I.16, V.8, XI.

122 Most famously, this is seen in Sun Tzu's emphasis on secret and double agents in the last chapter of *Art of War*, book XIII. It also occurs in his stress on the *tao* of the ruler and that of his opponent. Here we observe a passage where Sun Tzu would condemn a man like Coriolanus: "the general who in advancing does not seek personal fame...but whose only purpose is to protect the people and promote the best interests of his sovereign, is the precious jewel of the state," Sun Tzu, *Art of War*, X.19.

begin with the character of other regimes and the situations in which they find themselves.<sup>123</sup> As one example, Randall Schweller emphasizes the need to understand a rising China's self-conception and vision for foreign policy, and how these visions will play out differently as the world transitions from unipolarity to multipolarity.<sup>124</sup>

Where Shakespeare's character-driven approach to strategy resembles neoclassical realism, it might be closer still to the Christian realism of Reinhold Niebuhr. In a famous distinction, Niebuhr separates the "children of light," who want to subordinate self-interest to a moral law, from the "children of darkness," who "know no law beyond their will and interest."<sup>125</sup> He urges the children of light to learn from the children of darkness, *but also* to retain their innocence. Quoting Jesus, he argues "the preservation of a democratic civilization requires the wisdom of the serpent and the harmlessness of the dove."<sup>126</sup> For all their cunning, there is something finally ineffective about the strategies of serpents. Machiavelli, who so often privileges what works over what is good, in the end fails on his own terms. Following Shakespeare, we might even conclude that while doves often come to grief, serpents always do.<sup>127</sup>

Whether Niebuhrian, neoclassical, or something else, Shakespeare's realism reminds us that the theory must build on broader foundations than a narrow view of human nature. We might even say that, whoever founds on Machiavelli, founds on

mud. And in fact, when surveying structural realists' commentary on foreign policy, nothing is more common than the complaint that "Americans aren't realist enough."<sup>128</sup> For a theory whose supposed strength rests on its clear-eyed vision, its ability to see the world "as it is, not as we wish it to be," its theorists seem remarkably put out when human beings refuse to act as they predict. It is almost as if modern realists *wanted* people to be narrowly self-interested, power-hungry utility maximizers. While in the short run this view might lead to great success, in the end, it proves less effective than a more complete view of human nature.<sup>129</sup>

Before concluding this section, it is worth asking why the Tribunes have such a constricted view of human nature. Are the Tribunes Machiavels because of their constrained worldview, or is their lack of imagination a consequence of their strategy? The question is impossible to answer from the play, but we observe a few points. First, the Tribunes seem to have only base motives: Often we hear them scheme for power, but we never hear them be honestly disinterested.<sup>130</sup> If we recall that Coriolanus gets his "valiantness" from Volumnia, but pride he owes to himself,<sup>131</sup> then we might attribute the Tribunes' lowness to their family upbringing and education. Second, the Tribunes are ignorant of the past: On at least one occasion, Menenius takes them to task for their ignorance of basic history.<sup>132</sup> Third, the Tribunes may come from the merchant class, as later Tribunes often did, implying they had wealth but

123 Neoclassical realism first received widespread attention for its resurrection of the distinction between revisionist and satisfied states. Randall L. Schweller, "Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In," *International Security* 19, no. 1 (Summer 1994): 72–107, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2539149>.

124 Randall Schweller, "After Unipolarity: China's Visions of International Order in an Era of U.S. Decline," *International Security* 36, no. 1 (Summer 2011): 41–72, [https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00044](https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00044).

125 Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of Its Traditional Defense* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972): 361–62. Of course, it is better to be among the latter than the former, but Niebuhr wants to drive home to his reader that "the children of [darkness] are in their generation wiser than the children of light, ... [who] are usually foolish because they do not know the power of self-will. They underestimate the peril of anarchy in both the national and the international community" (p. 362).

126 Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, 378.

127 It is hard to find any Machiavellian characters in Shakespeare who enjoy long-term success. It is not just villains (such as Don John, Richard III, or Iago) whose strategies collapse, but even secondary characters like Wolsey. The only exception we can find is Philip the Bastard in *King John*. It is possible to expand our definition of Machiavellian to include figures like Henry V, as Cantor argues, but this goes too far, since these characters ultimately subordinate their designs to higher claims. Henry V might be a rake, or even a devious king, but he is also haunted by the fear of God, and he searches for a higher order than his own self will. For a reply to Cantor's classification of Henry V as Machiavellian, see, Andrew Moore, *Shakespeare Between Machiavelli and Hobbes: Dead Body Politics* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), 15.

128 For arguments in this vein, see for instance, John J. Mearsheimer, "Getting Ukraine Wrong," *New York Times*, March 13, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/14/opinion/getting-ukraine-wrong.html>; John J. Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions that Provoked Putin," *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 5 (September/October 2014): 77–89, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24483306>; Stephen M. Walt, "Taming American Power," *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 5 (September/October 2005): 105–20, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20031709>.

129 In the early days of the Cold War, Dulles makes exactly this critique of Soviet strategy: "time and again the Soviets and satellites pick the wrong people as agents. They misjudge character. They underestimate the power of courage and honesty. Their cynical view of loyalties other than their own kind blinds them to the dominant motives of free people." Dulles, *The Craft of Intelligence*, 191.

130 This is not a universally accepted statement. Some have argued that the Tribunes are public-spirited, as evidenced by the countless hours they spend adjudicating petty disputes among the plebs (II.i.62–65). The rejoinder to this points to the rest of the passage, where Menenius sneers, "all the peace [the Tribunes] make in their [the petitioners'] cause is calling both the parties knaves" (II.i.78–79).

131 *Coriolanus*, III.ii.142–43.

132 *Coriolanus*, IV.vi.50–52.



no aristocratic heritage and education.<sup>133</sup> If so, the Tribunes would embody a deadly combination for Shakespeare: power untethered by tradition, “foxship” with no sense of civic responsibility. Ultimately, Shakespeare is quiet about the origins of their narrow worldview, and we cannot say much with certainty. But we can say this: If the Tribunes had been more humanistic, more liberal in their view of human motivations, they might never have brought Rome to the brink of ruin.

## **The Great Man Without a Great Country**

*I would I were a Roman, for I cannot/Being a Volsc, be that I am*<sup>134</sup>

Besides the people of Rome and their representatives, Coriolanus’ chief rival is the Volscian general, Tullus Aufidius. Coriolanus admires Aufidius above all his opponents: “Were I anything but what I am,/I would wish me only he...He is a lion that I am proud to hunt.”<sup>135</sup> He sees in his Volscian enemy his own (dim) reflection. But unlike Coriolanus, Aufidius is the chief strategist of his country — he is not a mere tactician. Aufidius decides when to attack Rome and devises the strategy “To take in many towns, ere, almost, Rome/Should know we were afoot.”<sup>136</sup> He also hosts the rulers of Antium,<sup>137</sup> and he seems to take for granted their assent to his designs.<sup>138</sup> Unlike Coriolanus or the Tribunes, Aufidius is the first character we might legitimately call a *grand* strategist.

We see Aufidius’ superior grasp of strategy in his use of deception, his recognition of his own weaknesses, his integration of domestic and foreign operations, and his shrewd analysis of Coriolanus’ character. The combination of these strategic gifts makes him a formidable enemy.

At the tactical level, Coriolanus proves too much

for Aufidius, defeating him at every encounter. So Aufidius resolves to defeat him by “craft” rather than by “equal force.”<sup>139</sup> In the first act, we see Aufidius’ taste for deception in his use of spies before Corioles falls. These agents hunt down messengers between the Roman armies to impede enemy communication.<sup>140</sup> Unlike Coriolanus, who abhors deception of any kind, Aufidius combines martial valor with cunning, and this makes him a better strategist. (This same combination of valor and cunning also appears in Cominius, who retreats to gain his purpose, a maneuver Coriolanus considers fainthearted.) Similarly, Aufidius knows how to “temporize,” a skill Coriolanus lacks.<sup>141</sup>

By recognizing his need for craft instead of force, Aufidius also exhibits a humility unknown to Coriolanus. Aufidius makes no secret of his self-assessment: Even his servants observe that Coriolanus “was/ever too hard for him; I have heard him say so himself.”<sup>142</sup> Aufidius overcomes his pride when his own Volscian soldiers “fly to” Coriolanus and worship him like a god, putting it aside to achieve his strategic objective. He would not “lame the foot/Of our design” by confronting Coriolanus while the latter’s military prowess is serving Aufidius’ ambition.<sup>143</sup> Aufidius, unlike Coriolanus, does not allow pride to sabotage his strategy. He is the more effective for recognizing his own limitations.

Another sign that Aufidius is a superior strategist is his ability to integrate domestic and foreign policy more deliberately than Coriolanus or the Tribunes. Coriolanus ignores the domestic side of strategy, never reconciling himself to the democratic politics of Rome. The Tribunes ignore foreign policy, instead focusing on consolidating their power within the state. By contrast, Aufidius constantly maneuvers between the national and the international. For instance, upon returning to Antium at the end of the play, Aufidius immediately meets with his political allies among the Volsces. The prompt meeting between Aufidius and “Con-

133 For instance, IV.vi.158 would imply they are men of means. If Shakespeare is tapping into this mercantile background, he might be suggesting that their purely economic motives limit their understanding of honor. Nonetheless, this is speculative. Nothing is explicit in the text.

134 *Coriolanus*, I.x.4–5.

135 *Coriolanus*, I.i.231–32, 235–36.

136 *Coriolanus*, I.ii.23–24.

137 *Coriolanus*, IV.iv.8–9.

138 *Coriolanus*, IV.v.144–45.

139 Aufidius: “Mine emulation/Hath not that honour in’t it had: for where/I thought to crush him in an equal force,/True sword to sword/I’ll potch [jab, poke] at him some way,/Or wrath or craft may get him.” *Coriolanus*, I.x.12–16.

140 *Coriolanus*, I.vi.18–21.

141 As Menenius admits to the tribunes after Coriolanus’ exile: “All’s well, and might have been much better if/He could have temporiz’d.” *Coriolanus*, IV.vi.16–17.

142 *Coriolanus*, IV.v.183–84.

143 *Coriolanus*, IV.vii.7–8.

spirators of Aufidius's faction," as Shakespeare identifies them in the stage directions, makes clear that he put these preparations in place during Coriolanus' rise among the Volsces: At the same time as he was conducting a foreign invasion, Aufidius was also scheming inside the state. While Coriolanus concerned himself only with gaining a military victory over Rome, Aufidius planned how he would shape the subsequent peace to his advantage.<sup>144</sup> Moreover, like the Tribunes, and unlike Coriolanus, he considers the popular mood before he acts: "We must proceed as we find the people." Consequently, the Volscian general does not "fail," as Coriolanus did, in the "disposing of those chances/Which he [is] lord of."<sup>145</sup>

## We see Aufidius' superior grasp of strategy in his use of deception, his recognition of his own weaknesses, his integration of domestic and foreign operations, and his shrewd analysis of Coriolanus' character.

Most importantly, Aufidius knows his enemy. He studies Coriolanus' character, and he uses that to his advantage. For instance, Aufidius recognizes, like Plutarch, that Coriolanus' martial education likely made him ill suited to political office. He observes that Coriolanus is unable to move "From th'casque

to th'cushion [i.e., from the battlefield to the senate house], but commanding peace/Even with the same austerity and garb/As he controll'd the war."<sup>146</sup> He notes, "his nature/In that's no changeling."<sup>147</sup> After allying with Coriolanus, Aufidius marks out pride as the chief defect of Coriolanus' character.<sup>148</sup> His conclusion: Coriolanus is "bolder" than the devil, but "not so subtle." Amid the flux of war and politics, Coriolanus' inflexible character, and especially his pride, is a constant, and Aufidius manipulates this character to its ultimate destruction.

Thus Aufidius exhibits the key strategic skill that eludes both the proud Coriolanus and the overly rationalist Tribunes: He can place himself in his opponents' shoes. "To th'vulgar eye" it appears that all is going Coriolanus' way as he leads the Volsces against Rome, but Aufidius knows that Coriolanus "hath left undone/That which shall break his neck or hazard mine/When'er we come to our account." Aufidius is playing a more complex game, a grander game, than his Roman rival. And, at the last, he will defeat his enemy.

Nevertheless, we must recognize that, in the end, Aufidius fails to achieve his objective. He fails to see how Coriolanus will eclipse him.<sup>149</sup> He fails to see how Volumnia will sway his erstwhile enemy. Most of all, he fails to take Rome. And so, when Coriolanus yields to his mother, Aufidius is finished. He will take his vengeance, but the play ends with the Volsces and their allies quietly absorbed into Rome — and forgotten. The key to Aufidius' failure is his circumstance: He leads a backwater, barbarian coalition, not a complex, mixed republic. The accident of his birth prevents his talents from maturing fully. His failure corroborates a key thesis of the Greek historian Polybius: Rome's success arose from its constitution, not its leadership.<sup>150</sup> That such an exceptional strategist as Aufidius could nonetheless fail must remind us that, in the long run, a grand strategy can be no more effective than the society behind it.<sup>151</sup>

144 "When, Caius, Rome is thine,/Thou art poor'st of all: then shortly art thou mine." *Coriolanus*, IV.vii.56–57.

145 *Coriolanus*, IV.vii.40–41.

146 *Coriolanus*, IV.vii.43–45.

147 *Coriolanus*, IV.vii.10–11.

148 *Coriolanus*, IV.vii.8–9.

149 His failure to anticipate how Coriolanus will supplant him in the Volscian imagination seems to arise, at least in part, from his failure to understand the character of his own culture. Many scholars point out that, while the Roman citizens are portrayed as complex voices in *Coriolanus*, Shakespeare allows the barbarian tribes no such urbanity. Even their lords are simple characters. They worship warriors, not strategists, and so they elevate Coriolanus above their own Aufidius, for Coriolanus is, after all, the better fighter. (Here we see another strength of Rome: The Roman constitution had the good sense to exile Coriolanus, albeit after it foolishly made him consul, while the Volsces demote their best strategist.)

150 Polybius, *The Histories*: III.2, 118.

151 Some scholars argue that "only great powers can have grand strategies." While perhaps correct, we would also note a potential exception: Lee Kuan Yew was called the "grand master" of grand strategy, despite leading one of the world's smallest and weakest countries. That country, though, enjoys a rich, multicultural inheritance of Confucian mores and English law, not to mention its extraordinary multiethnic and multilingual diversity. Graham Allison and Robert D. Blackwill, *Lee Kuan Yew: The Grand Master's Insights on China, the United States, and the World* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013).





## Conclusion: The Complete Man

*Go get you home, you fragments*<sup>152</sup>

*Coriolanus* ends not in victory but with political compromise: “Let’s make the best of it,”<sup>153</sup> the Volscies conclude, and they join with Rome. War is the realm of absolutes, Clausewitz might say — and yet those absolutes must yield to political circumstances. If war is the “continuation of policy by other means,” then the strategist is the one who grips the reins of raw, absolute forces and turns them in the service of mealy policy, lesser evils, and “that naturally timid creature, man.”<sup>154</sup>

In *Coriolanus*, the title character’s overly martial and incomplete education, which in many ways undergirds Rome’s success, prefigures the republic’s ultimate destruction. Menenius and Cominius show that Rome could form leaders for both political and military success. However, as Plutarch notes, Rome’s emphasis on wartime exploits undermined this political education and its moderating effects on those with a martial spirit. This martial spirit and education proved a great asset to the early republic, but also a great weakness, both to the city and to its leadership. In part through teaching him Shakespeare, Fox Conner sought to ensure that Eisenhower avoided such a narrow education and its pitfalls. That Eisenhower became supreme commander in World War II and then, doing what Coriolanus could not, ascended to the leadership of his nation, shows that Conner succeeded where the early Roman republic failed.

Like Conner, we argue that literature is a powerful tool for educating the strategist. As evidence, we might cite Coriolanus himself: He had no appreciation for culture, not even his own. As a consequence, he could not shift with circumstance or see through others’ eyes. He was an incomplete man. Worse still, his pride and lack of humility made it impossible for him to see his own incompleteness — though it did not stop his enemies from seeing and exploiting it. An education that includes literature and art can breed humility, and this humility can make strategists more aware of their own limitations.

As well, great literature exposes strategists to more character types than their narrow experience allows. Henry V is an effective king because he knows all types of English society. Coriolanus is a bad consul, for he cannot get inside the head of the average Roman. Yet, it is not just proud aristocrats

like Coriolanus who do not understand their fellow man: The populist, Machiavellian Tribunes are just as blind, though in different ways. Shakespeare makes it clear that Aufidius, though not so great a warrior as Coriolanus, is the better strategist and the more complete human being. He combines Coriolanus’ leonine qualities with the foxlike ones of the Tribunes. He understands his enemies, both their virtues and their vices. He gets inside their heads. As such, he integrates domestic and foreign politics as they cannot. He achieves a *grand* strategy.

Nonetheless, Aufidius is not the most complete character in *Coriolanus*. For all his courage, practical wisdom, and perception, he still lacks something to make him complete: a worthy polis. In many ways, Aufidius is a victim of circumstance. For all his qualities, he was born a Volse, not a Roman, and this accident of birth limits the scope of his achievements. Among other things, he is a reminder to modern strategists to be on the lookout for those whose underprivileged circumstances might not reflect their true abilities.

All people are incomplete, are “fragments,” in the words of the play. A strategist must discern where a subordinate’s talents begin and end. Here we can again draw on the example of the relationship between Eisenhower and Patton. Eisenhower saw Patton’s strengths and placed this irrepressible fighter where his skills would best serve an Allied victory. He also removed Patton from more political positions where his dash and audacity would prove a liability rather than an asset to Allied grand strategy. The strategist must judge how to coordinate incomplete human beings in the service of a common aim.

We worry that modern strategy cares far more about necessary skills than necessary character. An overly rationalist view of human motivations can begin to resemble engineering. It will not prepare strategists to evaluate real, fragmentary human beings, nor will a focus on the structural and institutional makeup of international relations: While these abstract levels of analysis are important, they offer an incomplete picture of the landscape a strategist must navigate. No strategic education can be complete without studying individual character.

So who is the most complete strategist in *Coriolanus*? The most successful one of all, the one who bends everyone to a single will and a single ideal, is Volumnia. She creates Coriolanus, and she conquers him. Patricians, plebs, and even enemies pay her tribute: “This Volumnia/Is worth of consuls, sena-

152 *Coriolanus*, I.i.222.

153 *Coriolanus*, V.6.146.

154 Clausewitz, *On War*, 606.

tors, patricians,/A city full of tribunes.”<sup>155</sup>

In no one area is Volumnia the most adept strategist. Obviously, she lacks Coriolanus’ talent on the battlefield (though she might wish for it). Equally obvious is the fact that she is not as sly as Sicinius or a leader of men and nations like Aufidius. Yet, she remains the best *grand* strategist, for alone in the play she is the character who combines all these qualities in one person. She is no warrior like Coriolanus, but she has his courage and his sense of honor.<sup>156</sup> Unlike her son, she balances these virtues with prudence: “I have a heart as little apt as yours [for the mob],/ But yet a brain that leads my use of anger/To better vantage.”<sup>157</sup> She is no Machiavel like the Tribunes, but she is still cunning, and (unlike the Tribunes) she disassembles in the pursuit of honor and her city’s health: Speak “such words/That are but roted...[as if] to take in/A town with gentle words, which else would put you to your fortune and the hazard of much blood...My fortunes and my friends at stake required I should do so in honour.”<sup>158</sup>

To return to Niebuhr, Volumnia understands the serpents, and she can use their devices, but she is not one of them — she retains her nobility. Here she has much in common with Aufidius and Cominius, who are loyal and brave, but who also bide their time and use deception to succeed where brute force would fail. Lastly, unlike Aufidius, Volumnia lives in Rome, and as such she has behind her a complex social machinery capable of producing warriors, farmers, merchants, statesmen — and all in abundance. Thus, even though as a woman Rome deprives her of any formal strategic authority in its society, in the end, Volumnia executes a more successful grand strategy than anyone else in the play. She understands the diversity of human character, weathers her country’s crisis, and saves the republic.

But for all that, even this formidable woman — one of the most formidable in all of Shakespeare — is incomplete. Like Rome, as a mother she has given her son all the drive and strength and sense of duty he needs to conquer. However, she has not leavened those gifts with an education that might have tem-

pered his valor with humility or even affection.<sup>159</sup> Volumnia reminds us of a Spartan mother, who instilled her son with military virtue — and little else. She knows that strategy requires cunning but does not appreciate how the soldierly education she encouraged leaves her son unable to follow her advice. And while Coriolanus’ upbringing is extreme, Shakespeare does seem to use it to show the pattern of Rome, which “deliberately fosters the opinion that the best way of life is that of the public-spirited warrior.”<sup>160</sup> As another poet wrote:

Let others better mold the running mass  
Of metals, and inform the breathing brass,  
And soften into flesh a marble face;  
Plead better at the bar; describe the skies,  
And when the stars descend, and when  
they rise.  
But, Rome, ‘tis thine alone, with awful sway,  
To rule mankind, and make the world obey.<sup>161</sup>

Had Coriolanus’ education included more of these disciplines which Virgil assigns to other peoples, he might have been a better human being, and he would certainly have been a better strategist. In the end, only his devotion to his mother restrains Coriolanus from turning and devouring Rome with his gift for battle. Volumnia has made a force which Rome cannot contain. When another colossal figure would arise, one too great for the delicate compromises holding Rome together, there would be no Volumnia to hold him back. 🏰

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155 *Coriolanus*, V.iv.52–54.

156 “for I mock at death/With as big heart as thou,” *Coriolanus*, III.ii.127–28.

157 *Coriolanus*, III.ii.29–31.

158 *Coriolanus*, III.i.55–64. Note: Volumnia’s sense of honor leads her to fear what Coriolanus will do in exile, making her wiser than the Tribunes. She worries he will fix on some “wild exposure to each chance/That starts i’t’h way before thee” (IV.i.36–37), and she tries to take the precaution of sending Cominius to travel with him, but Coriolanus declines. Immediately before, Coriolanus had mused that he may “go alone,/Like to a lonely dragon” (IV.1.29–30). His mother may have read even here, the first day of his exile, the hint of her son’s intention.

159 In one of the more shocking lines in the play, Aufidius says, “that I see thee here,/Thou noble thing, more dances my rapt heart/Than when I first my wedded mistress saw/Bestride my threshold” (IV.v.115–18), and it seems Coriolanus requites his passion. Certainly Coriolanus never evinces much affection for his wife, and it is his mother who moves him at the end.

160 Cantor, *Shakespeare’s Rome*, 59. See also, Shakespeare “uses his Roman plays to explore what happens when a pagan republic focuses its activity almost exclusively on political life.” Paul Cantor, “Paul Cantor on Shakespeare, the Romans, and Austrian Economics,” interview by Allen Mendenhall, the Mises Institute, March 3, 2018, <https://mises.org/wire/paul-cantor-shakespeare-romans-and-austrian-economics>.

161 Virgil, *Aeneid*, trans. John Dryden, VI.847–53.